Black at Midd: 6/03/20 Email to President Laurie Patton

Black students at Middlebury College have historically been neglected and underrepresented in their struggles, both on and off-campus. Macroaggressions and microaggressions are plentiful in our Middlebury community and typically are not addressed.

Please read the below statement and continue to the next section to endorse the message. Your endorsement will help a lot in helping our voices be truly heard.

* Required

Email address *

Your email

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Below is a copy of the email sent to President Patton:

We first want to thank you in advance for taking the time to read this letter in its entirety and humbly urge you to thoughtfully reflect on our words. Our ultimate goal is to move towards making Middlebury College a safer space for Black individuals and other marginalized communities. This process of reconciliation and healing begins when student concerns are taken seriously, so we ask that you take this first step with us. Thank you.

To President Patton, members of the Senior Leadership Group, and Middlebury College community members,

“Black Lives Matter”

This statement is plain and simple, and its overcomplication can cause it to become diluted. Furthermore, discussion of the current protests responding to police brutality can become harmful if done without proper care, as demonstrated in the May 31st, 2020 message from the Office of the President. This message is an example of how overcomplicated discussions about the state of our nation have understated today’s current reality and in doing so, disappointed Black members of Middlebury’s community.

To name a few of the offenses in the message sent:

The False Equivalence of the Coronavirus and Racism
The conflation of the Coronavirus— a disease that selects its victims arbitrarily and that has been disproportionately affecting black and minority communities, who have historically been medically neglected— and racism— which derives from the concerted effort of those who hold privilege to work against those without the same level of power— is an incredible macro-aggression. The experiences one endures because of racism versus COVID-19 are vastly different because COVID-19 is largely by circumstance while racism is a conscious decision. To abdicate responsibility for intentional actions is yet another instance of the College’s neglect for its Black students, by way of not acknowledging the difference between choices and circumstance. Additionally, the current pervasive institutionalized racism affecting America deserves its own separate email, especially when COVID-19 has been addressed by the Office of the President multiple times, while racism and its impact on Black individuals has not. In attempting to use fluffy and soft language, the message dances around the severity of our nation's unfortunate situation, leaving Black readers without any true remedy.

The Notion that Racism is a New Concept
Racism did not appear recently to “infect the early days of our American summer” as the message indirectly suggests. This panders to the privileged perspective that White people have been inconvenienced by being forced to confront the reality of racism as summer approaches. White supremacy was the foundation that America was built upon, and racism is an ingrained part of the lives of Black people in America. Black students face that reality every day, both on and off campus. To suggest it is a new circumstance makes light of this harsh reality for the Black community

The Hypocrisy Associated with Middlebury’s Verbal Allegiance to Racial Equity but Lack of Action
The claim that Middlebury seeks to create a safe space for collaboration and a campus against racism directly contradicts the College’s actions. We recently invited Charles Murray to campus for a third time to discuss his racially offensive and scientifically baseless book, "Human Diversity: The Biology of Gender, Race, and Class" where he once again postulates a similar ideology as his earlier racist novel, "The Bell Curve.” The physical and psychological violence that this disproportionately inflicted upon the Black population of Middlebury College was never fully addressed, nor was there any real community reconciliation. Furthermore, the College’s intention to hire outside “security” from unknown and thus unreputable sources is incredibly problematic given the traumatic history of Black individuals being targeted by police, security, and law enforcement in an often fatal manner.

Failing to Specifically Support Black Community Members That Are Disproportionately Impacted by this Situation
The ambiguity in supporting specifically Black staff and students is incredibly p
of the difference between Black people and all people of color. In saying, “This is
time, particularly for students, staff, and faculty of color,” this message reduces the specific struggles of

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Black individuals in our community who are disproportionately impacted by institutionalized racism. It does our community a disservice to conflate the oppression faced by Black people with that faced by all people of color. Our institution should not hesitate to proclaim that #BlackLivesMatter and failing to do so resembles that of an #AllLivesMatter approach by creating a sense of erasure for Black issues. This is yet another microaggression. It is important that we recognize how other marginalized communities are affected by systems of oppression, but at this time it is necessary we hold space for and honor Black lives.

The Disturbing and Insensitive Use of Air as a Metaphor
The message claims that “in a world beset by two plagues, we are gasping for air”. This use of air as a metaphor, here and throughout the message, is profoundly tone-deaf and offensive, given that George Floyd’s (and before him, Eric Garner’s) final words were “I can’t breathe.” This is deeply disturbing given that Floyd was needlessly asphyxiated for nearly nine minutes, while the Coronavirus—which was also referenced in this letter– is a respiratory illness that inhibits the breathing of its victims. Their juxtaposition is deeply hurtful and strips away the reality and significance of Floyd’s death. Saying "we are gasping for air" begins to minimize the experience of Black people who (1) have legitimately had their breath taken away by police brutality and (2) are at a higher risk of infection of COVID. There is a certain level of privilege held by many in the Middlebury community, who are at lower risk of contracting COVID-19 and are simply able to avoid police brutality. To reiterate, COVID-19 and police brutality are not one in the same, and though the message is not the first instance where they are metaphorically compared, any case of such comparison is deeply offensive and cannot be silently accepted.

This hardly scratches the surface of the harm done to Middlebury’s Black students. This is not the first time that damage has been inflicted on our community. In just the past few years wherein institutional memory can guide us, Middlebury College has been complicit in allowing pervasive racism to exist on our campus. We hope the following instances will be properly recognized:
In 2016, the SGA passed a resolution denouncing insensitive comments made during the January 18th Martin Luther King Today event. This resolution was not acted upon and emails such as the one sent on May 31st, 2020 mirror the insensitivity illustrated four years ago.

In 2016, the Middlebury SGA and BSU Resolution Supporting Black Lives Matter sparked conversation within the Senior Leadership Group regarding how Black students can exist on Middlebury’s campus without fear of discrimination. These conversations died out until students brought the conversation to the forefront again (i.e. 2019’s Thirteen Proposals for Community Healing).

In 2017, the SGA Resolution to Support Black and Minority Students was passed, but many of the items outlined were not implemented (specifically items two, four, five, six (a), seven, and eight).

In 2017, the invitation of Charles Murray to discuss his racially charged pseudoscience, his introduction to the community by President Patton, and the ensuing reactions towards students of color, including Black individuals, all marked a form of psychological violence on communities of color.

In 2018 and 2019, the College failed to properly and definitively denounce the actions of faculty distributing racially insensitive and offensive course material.

In 2019, Middlebury’s invitation of Ryszard Legutko— who opposes the civil rights of a multitude of identities, including Black identifying individuals —marked yet another offense.

In 2020, the re-invitation of Charles Murray to discuss his newest iteration of racist pseudoscience and a lack of empathy or resources provided for your Black (and POC) students was another institutional action of unprovoked disrespect for Middlebury’s Black community.

This list could go on. We hope that by now we have made clear the blatant hypocrisy and performativity of this message, given the College’s history of perpetuating racial injustice.

The habitual dereliction of duty and meaningful action has become characteristic of Middlebury College as an institution. We need definitive action to be taken to put Middlebury on a more appropriate course of supporting its Black students, as well as those from other marginalized backgro
necessary to “collaborate with all members of our community to act against rac
accountable for the work that needs to be done." In the spirit of working together
equitable and aware community, we believe the following actions would be highly beneficial for the

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healing of Middlebury's Black students. Find them below:

Immediate Actions:

We ask that an all-community email be sent out apologizing for the harm– both past and current– inflicted upon the Black community of Middlebury College by the May 31, 2020 email and subsequent social media posts. We believe that this will begin to ease tensions during this tumultuous time for Black people everywhere.

For this email to be successful, we suggest the College formally denounce the racism and harm caused by certain problematic faculty, staff, and speakers— in at least all of the aforementioned instances—as they have left wounds that are still open, within Middlebury's Black community.

Additionally, that students be provided with tangible actions Middlebury will take in order to ensure the safety and fair treatment of Black community members when returning to campus in a state where the population is over 90% white.

We ask for a separate all-community email which provides resources, specifically for Black community members to utilize during this time in which our lives are constantly threatened with violence from national institutions.

We ask for a third all-community email which provides resources for non-Black community members that will empower them to become better allies of Black students, both on and off campus.

These are only beginning steps in repairing the damage caused by the historical actions and inaction taken by Middlebury. Please consider the depth of this situation and the importance of each student's valuable experience while Black at this institution.

We recognize that Middlebury will not be able to immediately fix all of these disparities. However, we ask that this outreach be considered as a starting point for reparations.

With that in mind, the following proposals are potential solutions to hardships faced in the past and present by Black students, other students of color, and the cultural organizations that represent them. We hope these solutions will spark critical conversations with the College Administration about the improvement of the treatment of students of marginalized backgrounds, especially those that are Black.

Suggested Actions to Take for the 2020-2021 School Year:

We ask for the implementation of a program in which cultural organizations will have collectively appointed correspondents (not from the same organization), self-selected by our memberships to engage in regular meetings with the Senior Leadership Group of the College, with regularity occurring at a minimum of three times a semester.

We ask that Middlebury designate a student or faculty member (or multiple students/faculty) who will specifically represent communities of color within the Board of Trustee meetings with the College administration.

There comes a time in which Black voices become tired of being silenced; it is unfortunate that we have reached that point in time with Middlebury College. We await your timely response and are hopeful that we will be able to work together to create positive change for marginalized students on campus.

Cordially,

Concerned Students of Middlebury College

Endorsed By the Following as of June 5, 2020:

Black Student Union

Distinguished Men of Color

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Womxn of Color

PALANA Social House

UMOJA

ALIANZA Latinoamericana y Caribeña

International Student Organization (ISO)

JUNTOS

Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC)

Queers and Allies (Q&A)

Feminist Action at Middlebury (FAM)

Underrepresented in STEM (UR-STEM)

Verbal Onslaught

Sunday Night Environmental Group (SNEG)

Middlebury College Hillel

WRMC

RAISINS

SEAS

Mixed Kids of Middlebury

EVOLUTION Dance Crew

ASIA

Brooker Haus

RIDDIM

Queer Studies House

On Tap

Midd Club Nordic

Hepburn Zoo Theater

Special Olympics

College Democrats

Middlebury Cycling

Trans Affinity Group (TAG)

Middlebury Students with Disabilities (MSD)

Midd Masti

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GlobeMed at Middlebury College

The Middlebury Mountain Club

Nutrition Outreach and Mentoring (NOM)

Middlebury Refugee Outreach Club (MiddROC)

Stuck in the Middle

Women's Waterpolo Club Team

Sunrise Movement Middlebury

Calligraphy Club

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- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

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